

Op-ed
TOPOFF Exercise
Gearing up for the “Super Bowl”
of Homeland Security Exercises

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Homeland defense is a radically different concept from what the Boomer and follow-on generations of Americans have become accustomed to. Wars and issues of “national” security have traditionally been dealt with in the “other Washington,” with the military and organizations like the CIA leading the charge. But next week, those of us whose job it is to prepare and keep our region safe will find ourselves in a place we have never been before. King County will be the first in the nation to snap the ball signifying the start of TOPOFF 2- the Super Bowl of emergency exercises and the biggest emergency counter-terrorism drill ever held in the world. Suddenly, we in the emergency preparedness field will come face-to-face with the realization we “aren’t in Kansas anymore.”

In the past, homeland security meant locking the back door and leaving the front porch light on for the kids. When we felt the need to learn first aid, CPR and other emergency response skills, it was just in case of a car accident or some other medical emergency. Even natural disasters happened to “other people” who live, work and play in a place not as safe as where “I” live.

But as we know, September 11th changed all that. It brought combat, the military deployment of our sons and daughters changed the value of our stock portfolio and perhaps even our own employment situation. But most of all, it changed our sense of security. We are no longer tucked snugly in the castle we call America - protected by the moats of the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. It was the War of 1812 when the British burned Washington DC when we last felt threatened by a foreign presence on our own home turf. As each of us knows all too well, times have changed.

It is for these reasons that the Department of Justice approached the State of Washington, King County and the City of Seattle and asked them to participate in the second Top Officials (TOPOFF) exercise ever held in this country. The first large-scale national TOPOFF exercise occurred in 2000 and included the cities of Denver, Colorado, Portsmouth, New Hampshire and Washington D.C. When asked to participate, we responded with a collective “yes.” Since that time, many other public and private organizations in the area have also raised their hand and joined this national counter-terrorism exercise.

TOPOFF is more than the largest terrorism exercise ever conducted here in the United States and the world. It will simulate multiple attacks against domestic targets using weapons of mass destruction both here in the Puget Sound region and in the State of Illinois, impacting Chicago, Cook County and surrounding areas. The focus of TOPOFF is on “Top Officials” and the inter-governmental coordination needed between local, state and federal authorities when reacting to events only contemplated, but never experienced in our nation’s history. We are plowing new disaster preparedness ground. These are low-frequency, high-consequence events. In essence, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for our region to make major advances at becoming better prepared for a variety of scenarios – everything from acts of terrorism to the devastating earthquake or flood we know our region will see again in the future.

Our one stipulation when asked by the Department of Justice to participate was that our involvement in TOPOFF fit the scope of funding provided by the federal government. We did this because of the significant budget crisis being experienced today by local and state governments. No additional state or county funds are being expended to directly participate in the exercise.

Will we do everything perfectly? Will every individual and organization understand their role and function as a well-oiled machine? Will national resources flow into our region and be deployed at the critical time and place without a hitch? Clearly the answer is “no.” But that is precisely why we are doing this exercise. We can talk about it. We can write plans and procedures, but then like any team, we have to take our game plan onto the field to practice it.

TOPOFF will indeed be our Super Bowl of preparedness exercises. It will provide us an opportunity to make every mistake in the book. Then to dissect the exercise afterwards to find out what went well and what needs fixing. Then, when lives and property are on the line some day in the future, you will hopefully have confidence that King County government, along with other agencies in the region, has done everything possible to become better prepared.

The world has changed significantly since September 11th. Our innocence is gone. It’s time for us to more closely examine what we are doing to react to the threat of terrorism. We, like the boar in an Aesop Fable, when asked why he was sharpening his tusks, replied, “The time for sharpening is now. If I wait for the fight to occur, it will be too late.” We are sharpening our tusks and using TOPOFF as a grinding wheel so we are better prepared for whatever lies ahead.